

## Who's For Cats?

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### Introduction

It has been estimated that there are around half a million unowned (stray and feral) cats in Victoria. Each year across the State, 50,000 cats are impounded, and 35,000 of these have to be euthanased. The associated financial costs exceed five million dollars annually. The emotional cost for the animal shelter staff performing the euthanasia procedures is more difficult to quantify. However research has confirmed that these workers can be susceptible to severe traumatic stress disorders (Rohlf et al, 2004).

Unowned cats often suffer from very poor health, and live in a state of malnutrition and disease. The average life expectancy of an unowned cat is 3 years, compared to 12-15 years for an owned desexed cat. Unowned cats coming into shelters and pounds can be underweight, sick with cat flu, or have heavy flea and worm infestations. They may have injuries from fights or from being hit by cars. They may also have developed skin cancers, or contracted fatal diseases such as feline AIDS.

In addition, unowned cats are a significant source of nuisance in the community - preying on wildlife, spraying strong smelling urine around houses and cars, fighting with owned cats and spreading disease, yowling at night, defecating in gardens and sandpits etc.

A Victorian study tracked the fate of 25,810 cats entering animal shelters over a 13 month period (Marston et al, 2006). It confirmed that the majority of cats admitted to shelters were unowned, and that most ended up being euthanased. Cats were primarily euthanased because they were wild or feral, due to poor health, or because not enough homes could be found for them. Even more tragically, thousands of these euthanasia victims were healthy, sociable kittens.

But analysis of health, ownership or sociability status aside, the key point here is that Victoria has a cat overpopulation problem. There are far more cats than there are owners willing or able to care for them. And without responsible owners, these cats are suffering from poor welfare, causing nuisance in the community, and placing enormous strain on the pound and shelter system.

Most experts agree that Victoria has a cat overpopulation problem, but there is less consensus about how to actually resolve it. "Who's for cats?" is a joint stakeholder response to this complex issue.

### Formation of the "Who's for cats?" Committee

The Victorian Minister for Agriculture has an Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (AWAC), comprised of representatives from a range of organisations in the animal welfare industry. In 2005, a number of AWAC members formed a Working Group (WG6) to specifically look at issues associated pet overpopulation.

One of their recommendations was for the Bureau of Animal Welfare (within the Department of Primary Industries) to undertake a joint media campaign with WG6, on the topic of responsible cat ownership. The idea was for the Bureau of Animal Welfare to fund the production of advertisements, which the non profit organisations in the group would then air as Community Service Announcements. Such pooling of resources and contact networks would be an extremely cost effective way of implementing a campaign.

In addition to the original members on AWAC WG6, several other organisations asked to take part in this joint initiative. The final project committee is comprised of the following organisations:

- Animal Welfare Science Centre
- Australian Veterinary Association
- Cat Protection Society
- Department of Primary Industries
- Lort Smith Animal Hospital
- Monash University
- Municipal Association of Victoria
- Pet Industry Association of Australia
- RSPCA
- The Lost Dogs' Home
- Victorian Animal Aid.

### Strategic development of the campaign

A large amount of research is available on the cat overpopulation problem, and the committee needed assistance in deciding which particular aspect of the issue the education campaign should focus on. For this reason, an advertising agency - "The Surgery" - was engaged to assist with campaign development.

The Surgery reviewed the available research and discussed ideas with the Committee, before proposing that the campaign focus on the issue of 'semi cat ownership'.

The cat overpopulation problem can be attributed to a number of factors, such as supply exceeding demand, the high reproductive capacity of cats, and general attitudes towards the species, which manifest in irresponsible cat ownership.

However, research conducted by Monash University (Toukhsati et al, 2005) has found that a major contributing factor to this problem is people feeding unowned cats but not taking full ownership or responsibility for them (e.g. they don't desex or identify them, or keep them on their property). From a random phone survey of 424 Victorian residents, 22% of respondents said they fed cats they didn't own. Feeding unowned cats helps regenerate cat colonies by keeping cats strong enough to reproduce.

The research found that people feed unowned cats because they feel sorry for them. They think they are helping these cats, and don't realise they're doing anything wrong. These people need to be informed about the consequences of their actions and the impact that it is having on the overall unowned cat population.

People who feed cats that they don't own have been termed 'semi cat owners'.

### Target audience

Research has found that semi cat owners:

- Engage in a single behaviour that indicates cat ownership - primarily feeding, but do not claim to own the cat (e.g. they don't register or desex it).
- Are most commonly women over 46 years of age (particularly 66yrs +)
- Believe cats to be independent.
- Have genuine care and concern for stray cats; they believe that feeding them is helping them.

## Changing attitudes and behaviours

Essentially, semi cat owners need to make a decision. Stop just feeding stray cats, and either:

1. Take full ownership and responsibility for the cat (including identification, desexing and veterinary care), or;
2. Arrange to have the cat impounded at the local council or animal shelter

In order to change these attitudes and behaviours, the education campaign needs:

- A single, powerful proposition: one clear message.
- An emotive and hard hitting approach.
- To appeal to semi-owners' love of cats, and get them to question whether their actions are actually in the cats' best interests. i.e. see the 'bigger picture'
- To communicate the message in a positive way without making our target audience feel defensive.
- To fully integrate the message across multichannel media to provide consistent exposure for long term attitudinal and behavioural change.

## Key message

The Surgery developed the following key message for the campaign:

***"Are you feeding a bigger problem?"***

## Creative concept

The creative concept and title of the campaign is:

***"Who's for cats?"***

The "Who's for cats?" concept was developed to maximise the campaign's impact, by contrasting to the popular Pedigree "We're for dogs" advertisements.

Stage 1 of the campaign shows images of cat lovers feeding unowned cats, and asks "Who's for cats?". The text underneath the images explains why these people are actually feeding a bigger problem.

Stage 2 of the campaign shows images of everyday people taking positive action, making them heroes and affirming that they are "for cats".

(Please refer to images on page opposite).

## Objectives

The short term objectives of the campaign are to:

- Increase the number of unowned cats being taken to shelters
- Increase the number of responsibly owned cats

The long term objectives are to:

- Reduce the number of cats taken to shelters
- Reduce the production of surplus kittens & the number of cats being euthanased in shelters
- Reduce nuisance issues caused by unowned cat colonies
- Increase the number of responsibly owned cats

## Development of campaign materials

Once the committee had agreed on the key message and creative concept for the campaign, a range of materials were developed, including:

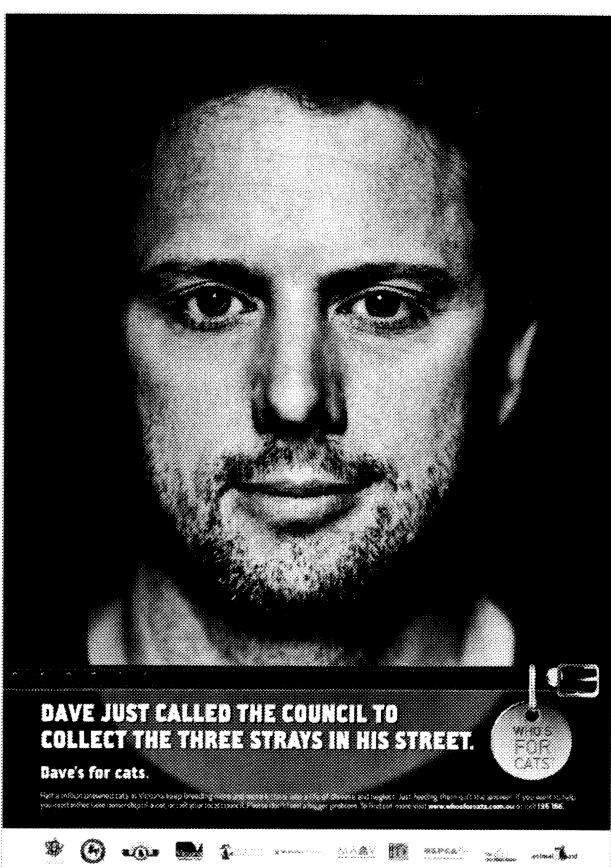
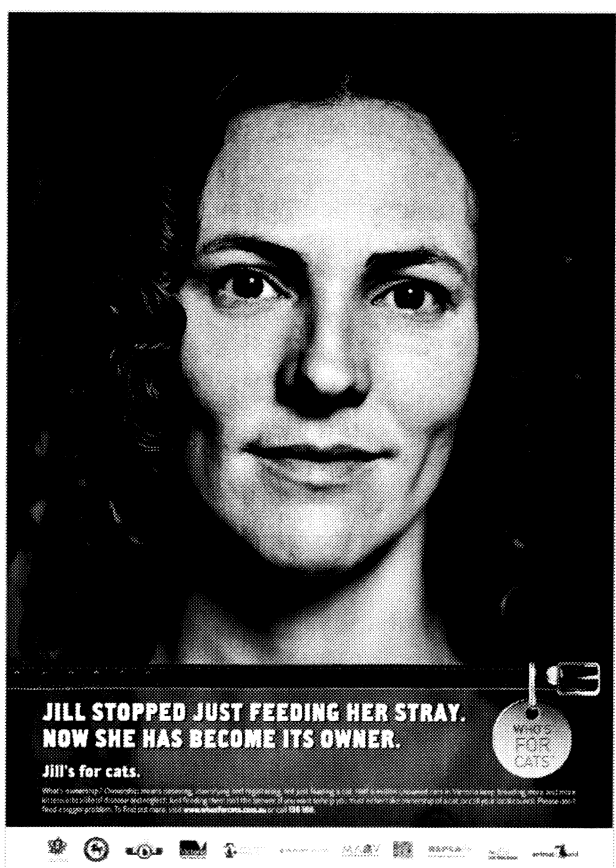
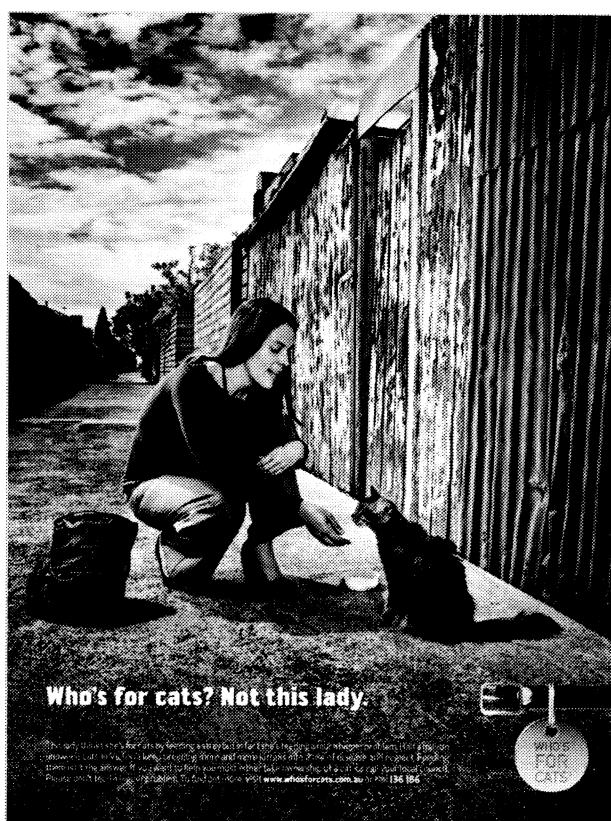
- Campaign brand (red collar with tag).
- TV, radio and newspaper advertisements.
- A website ([www.whosforcats.com.au](http://www.whosforcats.com.au)).

- A campaign phone line.
- Brochures and posters.
- Media kits for all stakeholders to utilise. These included a generic media release, to ensure that all groups kept to the agreed campaign messages.
- "Who's for cats" T shirts for animal shelter front counter staff.
- Banners and display boards for use at pet events.
- Showbags as an incentive for people adopting semi owned cats (including a red cat collar and silver tag, an "I love my cat" fridge magnet photo frame, a cat toy, a sticker, and a range of publications including a "How to build cat enclosures/cat proof fencing" booklet, and a copy of the Code of Practice for the Private Keeping of Cats).
- Purchase of additional cat traps, to alleviate the waiting list for people wishing to trap an unowned cat and take it to the pound.

## Activities completed

This campaign is designed to run over at least a twelve month period (it was launched in November 2007). Some of the activities completed to date include:

- The first round of Community Service Announcements took place in November 2007. This included a small number of radio and TV ad spots, along with two quarter page ads in the Herald Sun and two quarter page ads in The Age.
- The official media launch took place on 6th December 2007, at The Lost Dogs' Home. The campaign was launched by the Minister for Agriculture, Joe Helper, along with celebrity spokesperson Tracy Bartram.
- The public relations campaign continued during December 2007, generating an excellent response from the print media.
- Various radio interviews were conducted with campaign expert spokesperson (Dr Carole Webb, Cat Protection Society).
- Articles were published in stakeholder publications such as full page article in the Australian Veterinary Association's "VicVet", the Cat Protection Society Newsletter, Animal Aid Newsletter, Municipal Association of Victoria bulletin and a full page story in the RSPCA Magazine (with these publications reaching more than 100,000 people).
- The campaign was promoted through a dedicated display at the Melbourne Pet and Animal Expo.
- The campaign was promoted through stakeholder websites (e.g. all the animal shelter websites including RSPCA site which attracts 100,000 hits per month).
- Campaign material was displayed at stakeholder venues (posters, static displays in foyers).
- Campaign messages were promoted at stakeholder events (e.g. Cat Protection Society Open Day, RSPCA All Creatures Day, and RSPCA Million Paws Walk, attended by thousands of people).
- Campaign messages were incorporated into the Responsible Pet Ownership Schools Education Program. This Program is built into the Primary School curriculum, and students in grades 3-6 across Victoria will now have the opportunity to learn about the stray cat problem. The sessions involve airing the TV ad, discussing stray cat statistics and looking at ways to help resolve the cat overpopulation problem. Each child is also given a brochure to take home for their parents.
- Brochure and poster packs were distributed to all vet clinics across Victoria.
- Publications were distributed to pet shops and domestic animal businesses in Victoria.



- Local councils were briefed and supplied with FAQs and campaign materials. Some councils utilised the "Who's for cats?" display equipment for their local pet events, and for displays in council foyers.
- "Who's for cats?" TV ad was uploaded to You Tube.
- During May, the participating animal shelters ran an incentive scheme where people bringing in a previously stray cat could get it desexed, microchipped and vaccinated for only \$60. Each person also received a free "Who's for cats?" showbag.

## Evaluation

The campaign will be evaluated using the following methods.

- A comparison of cat impoundment/euthanasia statistics pre and post campaign.
- A comparison of cat registration statistics pre and post campaign.
- Analysis of campaign outputs e.g. website visits, publications distributed, media interest.
- Stakeholder feedback.
- (Budget permitting) a follow up to the Monash University survey, to compare the percentage of people who feed unowned cats (pre vs. post campaign).

A full evaluation report will be available in early 2009. However, there are some interim evaluation results, as follows:

- Various council pounds and animal shelters across Victoria have reported record numbers of cats being brought in for surrender since late last year. Some shelters have reported a 50% increase. Whilst there are undoubtedly other factors involved in this change (such as a longer than usual cat breeding season / climate change / economic pressures on cat owners), staff at several shelters have attributed at least part of this result to the effects of the "Who's for cats?" campaign. This indicates that semi cat owners are listening to campaign messages about handing in cats if they are not able to take full responsibility for them.
- Further evidence of the campaign resulting in behavioural change comes from a recent RSPCA Inspectorate report. The report states that compared to the previous financial year, there has been a 41.9% increase in the number of calls regarding cats and that "the increase began around January and has continued through the "Who's for cats?" campaign". In contrast, during the same period, the number of calls regarding dogs decreased by 5%.
- The campaign continues to have a strong presence in the print media. Since November 2007, more than 50 stories have been published, mainly in local newspapers. These articles either directly discuss the campaign, or pick up on campaign messages when reporting on related issues. This is an impressive result, and one which the participating animal shelters can largely take credit for. Compared to placing paid advertisements, articles in newspapers are a much more effective way of getting campaign messages out into the community.
- The campaign has generated discussions on major radio shows, such as a lengthy debate on 3AW's Ernie Sigley show, reaching the show's 71,000 listeners (who are an ideal target audience for campaign).
- The campaign has been attracting a significant amount of interest from Interstate, several other States seeking permission to adapt campaign materials for their own use, and with requests to present campaign information at several national and international conferences.

The campaign has also featured in advertising industry publications, including a recent article in the "Australian Creative Magazine".

- To date, more than 100,000 "Who's for cats" brochures and posters have been distributed.
- The [www.whosforcats.com.au](http://www.whosforcats.com.au) website has been attracting around 400-600 visits per month. In addition, the campaign TV advertisement has been viewed more than 3,500 times on You Tube. A 'Google' search found that members of the public have also listed campaign information on personal websites, discussed the campaign in online forums, and listed the campaign as a 'cause' on face book. This shows that people are aware of the campaign messages and website, are seeking out and watching the TV ad and are taking action as a result of this (for instance, one of the online forum threads provides an excellent example of attitudinal change as a result of the campaign's messages).
- A small survey delivered by the DPI Customer Service Centre during the November round of advertising found that 60% of callers said "yes" the "Who's for cats?" campaign would be effective in raising awareness about the stray cat problem (40% said "don't know", 0 said "no"). Sixty four percent of callers said "yes" they would change their behaviour (i.e. adopt the stray or have it impounded) as a result of the campaign (24% said "maybe", 12% said "no").

## Where to from here

The next major round of advertising is scheduled for September through to November 2008. Planned activities include:

- Radio advertising campaign
- Billboard advertising
- Targeted seniors advertising
- Repeat of the shelter discount offer (\$60 desex/vaccinate/microchip semi owned cats)
- Multicultural advertising (e.g. translated radio ads)
- Promotion at the Royal Melbourne Show
- Media / public relations promotions
- Wide range of stakeholder activities e.g. print and website advertisements, promotion at events.

## Conclusion

"Who's for cats?" is the first Australian campaign to involve the cooperation of so many different animal welfare organisations. By pooling resources, this cooperative campaign means that together we are achieving much more than any of us could have on our own. Considering the scope of activities undertaken, and the results so far, the money spent (less than \$200,000 to date) has been extremely modest. Despite having major differences in opinion on other issues such as mandatory desexing, all participating stakeholders have been able to work together and agree on the key messages for the "Who's for cats?" campaign. The fact that so many different organisations are supporting the campaign adds considerable strength to the messages that we are promoting to our target audience. Ultimately, it goes to show that we're all for cats.

## Acknowledgements

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## About the Author

Neva Van de Kuyt is employed with the Bureau of Animal Welfare, Victorian Department of Primary Industries. Neva's work involves coordinating the Responsible Pet Ownership Community Education Program. This Program aims to provide councils with resources and assistance to help them promote responsible pet ownership in their local communities.

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